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## Commission on the Status of Women

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entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by Institute of Social Studies Trust, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Digital economy and engagement with technology for work has become an important component of accessing information and doing work. As digital technologies have become increasingly important medium to gain knowledge, skills as well as network and market one's own skills and expertise, there is an emerging focus to understand the gendered digital landscape. Armed with technology and the internet, women are able to develop their own ideas and act on them. It allows women access to information about education, livelihoods, skills and general well-being, which in turn transform traditional gender relations in families, communities and market. And yet traditional gender disparities, barriers due to the care responsibilities of women and overall poor performance on social protection, are seen to reflect in the digital space as well.

As per the United Nations High-level Report (2017), all over the world women are 14% less likely to own a mobile phone and women have 12% lower access to the Internet than men. Online registration being mandatory to avail the COVID-19 till June 2021. Despite the mobile ownership gap reducing from 26 percent to 19 percent, and mobile internet use gap from 67 percent to 36 percent, between 2017 to 2020, South Asia continues to have the widest mobile gender gaps globally (Groupe Speciale Mobile Association Report, 2021). In India, The National Family Health Survey 2019–21, suggests that only 57.1 percent of the male population and 33.3 percent of the female population in India had ever used the internet. Whilst 72.5 percent of the urban males and 51.8 percent of the urban females have ever used the internet, only 48.7 percent of rural males and 24.6 percent of the rural females qualify for this condition. It is interesting to note that across all states urban males have the highest percentages, whilst rural females have the lowest percentage (Chandola, 2022).

Based on National Sample Survey Office 2011-12 Employment and Unemployment Schedule, there is a rural – urban and female – male divide in the ICT sector which amounts to more urban and male population engaged in the ICT than rural and female population (SEWA-INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST, 2020). The gendered digital divide is often born out of a triple disadvantage for women in India. First, there is a rural-urban digital divide, such that rural broadband penetration is only 29 percent against a national average of 51 percent. Across states, women in rural areas are less likely to own mobile phones. Second, there is an income-based digital divide between households. Given the average price for data is US \$0.68/GB in India, estimates show that each GB of data costs low-income households (earning less than US\$2/day) 3 percent of their monthly income versus 0.2 percent for middle-income households (earning US \$10–\$20 per day). Finally, intra-household discrimination prevents women from equitably accessing digital devices within the domestic sphere, which in turn widens the gender-based digital divide (Nikore and Upadhyay, 2021).

Digital India programme was launched in 2015 by the Government of India, and yet there is a persistent digital gap in India due to limited access to digital resources and absence of digital literacy. A working paper published by SEWA – INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST (2020) on Digital India highlights that Internet usage in India is closely associated with social media use and only 10% people use it for work. While India was found to have the highest number of users in Asia for app based buying and selling (platforms like Amazon, Ali Baba and eBay) there are still issues of lack of knowledge, concerns about product quality, unwillingness to share details with third parties which restricts the use of e-commerce platforms.

It is also shown that use of online messaging and information sharing platforms like Whatsapp and YouTube, location apps like Google Maps has potential to help home based workers, young women to learn and upgrade their skills as well as provide a semblance of security while moving out of the house alone. However, digital illiteracy and unfamiliarity with digital platforms deterred women entrepreneurs from moving to online marketplaces post COVID-19 (Nikore and Upadhyay, 2021) The gender digital divide also prohibited young women and girls access to crucial government social security benefits as well during the time of the pandemic and the lockdown (INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST, 2020) Online registration being mandatory to avail the COVID-19 till June 2021 also hampered women's access to Covid-19 vaccination.

Digital access to technology and ownership of mobile phones in India are further governed by intra-household discrimination and gender norms. As such, it is mainly the male members in the family who own and use mobile phone which impacts women's and girl's access to information on education, health, livelihood, etc. INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST's study (2021) showed how the negligible access to messaging apps of mother impacted the learning skills to children during the pandemic. Further, there is lack of systematic or large scale data available in India on how women's intersectionality – location, age, caste, class, religion, marital status, etc. – impact access to digital technology.

From the perspective of livelihoods, INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES TRUST study (2020) on women workers in gig economy in India, recognizes the potential of gig economy for engagement of women workers in India. The study highlights the importance of having basic technical skills (such as GPS map reading, mobile wallet transactions, operating the apps, etc.) and ownership of smart phones as essential to joining the new economy. It is equally important to understand how algorithms work in the platform economy which impacts incomes and decent work conditions. The study also highlighted that there is growing violence in the new economy through the use of smart phones and internet and there aren't suitable mechanisms and systems in place to check the same.

Algorithm controls used by service aggregators are designed to maximize profits based on completion of tasks and subsequent incentivization. Owing to care responsibilities, women are unable to work at full capacity which impacts performance and earning capacity which is governed by the gender-blind algorithms.

Many of these studies highlight the gender gap in digital spaces while at same time showing that within women there is levels of marginalisation. So, while digital technologies and platforms present a new avenue for women's and girls' empowerment, there are limitations in its access and concerns about it replicating and borrowing the existing power hierarchies. These have to be addressed in order to ensure a meaningful inclusion of women and girls in the digital economy and use digital economy to further gender equality and empowerment.

Based on these studies, the following recommendations are made:

1. Ensure gender-disaggregated data on use and access to internet connectivity, use of smart phones, etc.
2. Intensive digital literacy programmes for women and girls to safe online financial transactions, protection from cyber abuse as this will help them counter the barriers to access digital resources.
3. Increasing public investment in the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan scheme from its current allocation of INR 300 crores in fiscal year 2022, of which 40 percent is for women and girls.

4. Set up regular mechanisms to draw on insights and learning from the rich experience of women's groups working with a social justice framework while designing and implementing training courses for women entrepreneurs on digital marketing and digital payments and while integrating digital literacy in school curricula.
5. Introduce regulatory mechanisms after consultations with women workers and organisations working on women worker rights to promote safe and secure working conditions for women in the Gig economy.
6. Service aggregators to make gender disaggregated data such as enrolment, training, retention, earning, days/hours of work provided, available in the public domain.
7. Algorithm developers, corporate houses operating in India should be sensitized to the care responsibilities that women have to fulfil and invest in facilities that provide full day child care support.

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